

Rococo and Neoclassical Interiors

January 18-May 6, 2011

This installation brings together a diverse group of objects in the Davis Museum collections related to eighteenth-century European interiors. Architecture and interior decoration, like fashion and the print trade, allowed elite consumers in this period to explore and exhibit their knowledge, taste, and sense of self-identity. Rococo and exotic ornament prints were used as models for wall paneling, textiles, and porcelain; pastoral paintings, portraits, and neoclassical furnishings enlivened domestic spaces. Other works on display represent new sorts of environments—auction houses, art galleries, and bath complexes—that were intended to both entertain and instruct the public.

This installation has been organized in conjunction with the Art Department's spring 2011 seminar, ARTH 325: Rococo and Neoclassical Interiors. Over the semester, students researched and gave gallery talks on an object in the collections, and they wrote short texts that make up the present publication. I would like to thank the seminar students for their unflagging hard work and enthusiasm; together they have created a polished and brilliantly insightful catalogue that expands our knowledge of the museum's rich holdings of eighteenth-century art.

Meredith Martin
Assistant Professor of 18th- and 19th-Century European Art
Wellesley College

ARTH 325 students (Spring 2011):

Cabelle Ahn
Francis Cho
Emma Curtis
Wendy Dickieson
Sarah Fiori
Jenny Harris
Hannah Keck
Anna Kim
Sara Putterman
Alexa Rice
Casi Schwisow
Rachel Spaulding
Eliza Tibbits
Nancy Welsh
Annie Zhang

Catalogue

Catalogue no. 1

Unknown

Louis XV-style Gilt *Surtout*, ca. 1750

Gilded Bronze

Gift offer Mrs Albert M. Steinert in memory of her daughter Kathryn L. Steinert 1958.13

The style of this particular gilt *surtout* (table centerpiece) is associated with the reign of Louis XV. The organic, serpentine lines of the base and the recurring shell motifs recall the partial origin of the term “Rococo” from *coquillage*, the French word for shell. Two nymphs, lightly draped with sheets, hold afloat a golden shell supported by palm trees. The upturned shells were most likely containers, the two smaller ones for spices and the larger one on top for fruits or meats. As early as the seventeenth century, *surtouts* played prominent roles in the French dining repertory. These earlier centerpieces reunited the decorative with the functional, combining candleholders with spice jars, oil bottles, salt, sugar and pepper shakers. With the rise of the Rococo under Louis XV’s reign, the functional aspect of the *surtout* became subsumed within exuberant and sensuous Rococo ornamentation, a trend echoed in this *surtout* by the relatively small sizes of its containers.¹

The Davis Museum’s gilt *surtout* is composed of heavily gilded bronze, a medium that often substituted for precious metals in the eighteenth century as a glamorous and economical alternative. Bronze was also practical, since multiples could be easily cast from a single mould, and was often used to create porcelain mounts and cabinet accents. *Surtouts* such as this would have been accompanied by equally dazzling bronze ware on either side, with the entire arrangement placed on a large mirror to amplify and reflect light. Starting as early as the sixteenth century, tabletop designers drew upon the aesthetic vocabulary of landscape architects, porcelain modelers, and interior decorators to construct miniature landscapes on tabletops.² Thus, it is most likely that small sugar figurines, later replaced by porcelain and silver figurines, would have accompanied this *surtout*.

While the Louis XV-style gilt *surtout* is of unknown provenance, it was most likely made for a wealthy or even a royal client. An 1865 engraving by Jules Gaildrau shows two pieces that bear resemblance to the museum’s *surtout* (fig. 1). This engraving shows part of the 4,938 pieces of table service inspired by Louis XV that Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico commissioned for the Castle of Chapultepec in the late nineteenth century. In fact, a twin to the Davis’ gilt *surtout* exists in a private collection,³ which suggests that this piece may have flanked a more elaborate centerpiece along with its twin, rather than functioning as a centerpiece. This supposition could account for the *surtout*’s symmetrical nature compared to the usual irregular ostentation of Rococo decorative arts.

Cabelle Ahn

¹ This entry draws upon information from Pierre Ennès, *Histoire de la table: les arts de la table des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994).

² Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, *Savoring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300-1789* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

³ This information is contained in the Davis Museum’s object file for the gilt *surtout*.

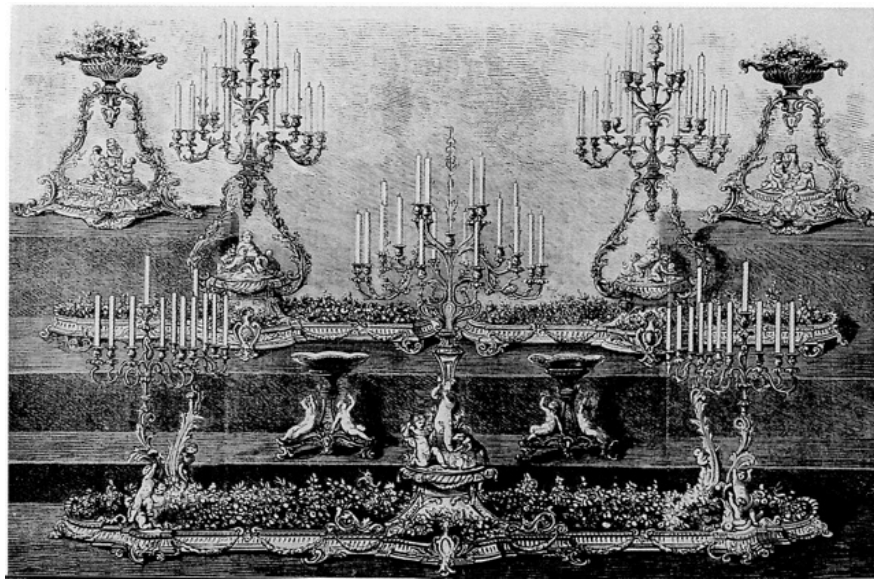


Fig. 1